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TEN YEARS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.

BY EDMUND GOSSE.

THE trumpets and fifes of this almost too glorious summer are over at last, and we sink back into the drowsiness of the day after the feast. This, then, should not be an inappropriate moment for the man of letters to set his house in order, and ask himself what effect all the long-drawn popular triumph which culminated in June has had upon his profession, in what a state it found and left him in his essential capacity. It seems worth while to discover what the last ten years have brought about in English literature, where we are in fact, and what pace we have been making. It by no means follows that political success means intellectual prosperity, and it is notoriously difficult to grasp a situation which is unfolding at our very feet. Yet an occasional summary of symptoms, a closing of the shop for an hour to take stock, cannot but be a useful exercise, though the calculation be not final.

It is quite plain, by every analogy of literary history, that we must not expect the progress of intellectual events to be regular. There have always been bursts of genius, followed by pauses or drops into mediocrity, and in England at least these have been noticeable ever since the art of verse, lifted so high in the hands of Chaucer, fell so low in those of his immediate successors. We ought not to despair of the Republic because there is a hush among the voices, but we should read Matthew Arnold's *The New Age* once more, and learn its excellent lesson. When, however, we attempt to concentrate our attention on the literary developments of these last ten years in England, a more unusual phenomenon, I think, meets our notice than would be caused by the mere fluctuation of talent. As events develop from day to day, each exaggerated in apparent importance as it occurs, and

then unduly submerged in the wave of a new excitement, we perceive no general tendency nor common plan. But a space of ten years is at least a fragment of history. What can we discover of the form and character of 1887-1897?

This, first and foremost, is evident: It has been a period of the removal of landmarks. The stream of literature catches itself here and there against little weirs or breakwaters, by which it makes shorter or longer pause before flinging itself onward in cascade. The most effective mode in which this delay is caused is certainly by the protracted life of men of great genius. The prestige of very famous old men, their conservative temper, the instinctive honor paid them even by those whose practice is of a different order, delay the transmutation of literary form. Each ancient person of this kind forms a rock or inert mass, against which the stream of literature breaks and pauses. Death removes the honored obstacle, and the tide of taste precipitates itself over the space it occupied. We have only to examine history, and see what was the effect of the deaths of Ben Jonson, of Dryden, of Samuel Johnson. These facts, the removals in exhausted age of these old men, made 1637, 1700, and 1784 not merely convenient dates in the handbooks of literature, but actual flingings-open of flood-gates to the urgent waters of a change of taste.

If this be so, and it can hardly be denied, the phenomenally congested state of English literature, and particularly of poetry, ten years ago, will be seen to have been a feature which outweighed all others. If one great poet (as Victor Hugo in France) holds back the stream of invention to a highly noticeable degree, what will three or four do? The more venerable the writer becomes, the greater is his force as a repressive influence. The more kindly, the more sympathetic he is, the more difficult it is to oppose his accepted canons. Such a figure as that of Browning in 1889, or of Tennyson in 1892, possesses an almost superhuman stature. His experience, his devotion to his art, his social assumption above all common praise or blame, enfolds him in a kind of deity which his work presently ceases to enjoy in the coolness of posthumous judgment. The living bard, in extreme old age, touches for a moment the heights of glory. He is regarded with something of a superstitious awe. To younger men he seems, like the prophet Aruns in that marble cave of which

Dante speaks in the *Inferno*, lifted to a height from whence all mortal things can be watched in their spectacular simplicity :

“Onde a guardar le stelle
E ’l mar non gli era la veduta tronca.”

But at no previous moment in our literary history were there so many of these wonderful old men, these half-supernatural sooth-sayers, as in 1888. Their congregated tradition, their combined resistance to change and reform, offered a really surprising breadth and height of suspension to the moving flood of taste. Tennyson was writing still, and his modes had not radically changed for sixty years. Browning, having completely conquered the public and the critics, was nearing his eightieth year. For those who loved elegance and lucidity in prose, what could be offered more acceptable than that of Newman, and Newman, on the borders of ninety, was still alive ? At Oxford, Jowett formed a barrier of influence ; in science, there were Tyndall and Huxley ; in history, there were Kinglake and Froude. It was to be expected that, in the natural course of events, these eldest names would be removed by death. It was not less to be expected that they would be succeeded, and their prestige be supported, with a difference, by those of a slightly younger generation. Tennyson and Browning must be taken, of course ; but Matthew Arnold and William Morris would remain. Jowett would go, but there would be Pater ; Froude must, surely, be succeeded by Freeman, and Church by Lightfoot. So it was naturally to be expected, and thus the length and volume of the cascade would have been broken. But it was not so to be ; and the unique feature of this last decade of literary history in England has been that it has not merely removed, in unusual and sinister proximity, the heads of the oldest generation, but that it has taken with them those who should have survived to illuminate the blank they leave.

There are surviving in England at the present time only two aged writers whose appearance on a public occasion could excite universal enthusiasm. Only two ; for Mr. Gladstone does not solely or even considerably owe his prestige, as Mr. Ruskin and Mr. Herbert Spencer do, to the exercise of the pen. But Mr. Ruskin, quite unseen at Coniston, has practically, alas ! joined the chorus of those invisible singers whose births made the second decade of this century so incomparably splendid. There re-

mains, then, Mr. Spencér, still visible, and still clothed about with the garment of an extreme celebrity. But, with that exception, there is not now in London left one very old man to whom young people might look as they might ten years ago to a whole galaxy of genius. And in the generation succeeding that of Darwin and Tennyson, death has scarcely been less busy. If Mr. George Meredith is spared to us for ten years more, he will become one of those quasi-fabulous figures which stimulate curiosity so much, and serve so well to keep alight the flame of enthusiasm. But to find a single other name which can conceivably be put in the same topmost rank, we must come down to a still younger generation, to Mr. Swinburne and his juniors, and it will be long, indeed, and far into the twentieth century, before Mr. Swinburne, *flos juventutis* of our poetry, can consent to be venerable.

The removal of landmarks, then, is certainly the main phenomenon of these last ten years, and all other aspects of current literary history are affected by it. In one way it has doubtless had its practical benefit in clearing the ground. The fall of so many forest trees has let in plenty of light, and the youngest generations have directly benefited. The removal of these superlative rivals, against whom few beginners could without confusion be pitted, has given us opportunity to do justice to a large number of developing talents. It has, moreover, prevented the talents from being forced to develop in a way which was unsympathetic to their nature. All this, however, and so far as this is true, merely encourages the equal sprouting of underwood; it has no effect on potential forest trees, or very little. Hence what we have seen in these last ten years is an enormous extension of literary activity, by no means symptomatic of creative and intellectual force. In other words, the trade of author has suddenly become exceedingly lucrative; so much so as to hide the fact that at no time since 1837 has literature, in the higher sense, been so quiescent as it is now.

There is one exception, however, and this of peculiar interest. The deaths of Arnold, of Browning, of Christina Rossetti, and still more of Tennyson, had an instant and almost entirely beneficial influence on poetry. Over the grave of the great Laureate, the newspapers foreboded that verse was dead. Never was there made a more unlucky prophecy. A whole group of various,

but distinguished and enthusiastic poets, whose presence amongst us had been all but unperceived, came to the front, and renewed their own youth and ours. Nothing can be kept up at such a pressure as was the excitement in poetry between 1891 and 1895; the leaders in the new school have taken their places in current literature and will keep it, but genius no longer seems to burden every bough. It is too much to say that the poets of 1892 console us altogether for the intolerable losses our noblest literature was just then enduring; time has not yet sifted their final pretensions. But it is quite certain that the variety, delicacy, and fervor of its young versemen have done more to redeem the decade from the charge of poverty of spirit than any other products of the pen, and the spiritual quality which interpenetrates some of their best work offers the most encouraging phenomenon of recent intellectual life in England.

But, in other departments, it can scarcely be questioned that a very grave feature of the decade of which we speak has been the cessation of activity in the higher branches of literature. One section of letters, indeed, has flourished to an extremely disproportionate degree, namely fiction. A novel may be of the first or of the last order of merit; its rank depends entirely upon its author and his treatment. There is no dignity or value in a story apart from the skill with which the author tells it. Now, a work of history or philosophy or science, if it exists at all, has a basal value upon which any graces of the writer are superimposed. History, for instance, is the better for being written by a Gibbon or a Green; but it is respectable if compiled by a man of judgment and knowledge who can scarcely put two sentences together. So with most other branches of literature; even poetry has its metrical skeleton, its supporting prosody, for which technical training is required. But prose fiction has nothing whatever to guide it but the cleverness of the person who essays to tell us a tale under the hawthorn. The novel, therefore, is precisely the kind of published matter which we should expect to see abounding in an age indifferent to equipment, and rebellious to the intellectual hierarchy, for this is work which demands no training and bows to no tradition.

The extreme volubility and number of the novelists—a few of them really great, many of them interesting and amusing, the vast majority wholly worthless, mere cumberings of the press—

must not deceive us as to the intellectual character of any epoch. The story-teller is our companion in every age. But although, to the commercialism of the day, the novel seems an extremely important factor in current letters, it has really proved in the past to be the most ephemeral. The great novelists, the Jane Austens and the Charlotte Brontës, the Fieldings and the Thackerays, live among the poets, by virtue of their style and their creative force. The rest, in their thousands, are drowned in immediate and final oblivion a few months after the issue of their books. The ordinary common novel, nowadays, is a mere *article de Paris* or variety of fancy goods. It is manufactured to amuse without a demand for mental effort, and to be thrown away.

It is true, none the less, that even this vast multiplication of novels within the decade now closing cannot be taken as a purely negative phenomenon. It shows a restless energy directed along lines not by any means purely unintellectual. If we compare the activity of English fiction with the deadness of the novel in Germany, or with the fashion in France for books of pure eccentricity, we have not anything to complain of. Excellent novels have been published in England since 1887, and of a singularly various order. The realistic, the antiquarian, the social-didactic, the supernatural, the military, and the idyllic schools have all flourished. An especial feature of the ten years has been the production of a crop of romances, written in broad Scotch for an English audience, but intelligible, it is said, to many readers north of the Tweed. With some of these stories there are issued useful glossaries which bring them within the reach of all. Early in the ten years, Mr. Rudyard Kipling arose, meteoric, like a god out of India, and straightway the field of fiction was infinitely widened. We have novels of Canada and of the Transvaal, of Borneo and of Tahiti.

Fashion grows with what it feeds on, and unquestionably the extreme vogue of this particular kind of book, the prose story, has drawn into its vortex many talents which had no original tendency in that direction. For example, Stevenson, manifestly born to be an essayist and perhaps a philosopher, was dragged, as a magnet draws a needle, to the irresistible rock of story-telling, and *Treasure Island*, begun as a joke for a boys' newspaper, was made the pioneer of a series of tales to which the author's exquisite style gave the persistence of literature. In Mrs. Hum-

phrey Ward a most accomplished literary critic has been lost to us; in Mr. George Moore a candid student of sociology; in Mr. Stanley Weyman a historian of the school of Robertson. Among the departments of literary energy which are now the most neglected is scientific philosophy of the sort so brilliantly illustrated by two of the great men who have disappeared since 1888, by Tyndall and Huxley. The class of writer which they represented, the pioneer in physical discovery, who is also a splendid popular exponent, combining accurate research with the exercise of imagination and style, has ceased to exist in England. Mr. Wells might have risen in it to the highest consideration, but he prefers to tell little horrible stories about monsters. On all sides we may see, and we ought not to see without acute alarm, the finer talents being drawn from the arduous exercises to which nature intended to devote them to the facile fields of fiction.

The result of all this is that, to an extent which ought to occasion all serious observers no little alarm, the great reading public is rapidly becoming unable to assimilate any ideas at all, and to appreciate impressions it requires to have them presented to it in the form of a story. The multitude of readers grows every hour, but with these masses those individuals become fewer and fewer who are able to follow the path-ways of thought without the help of knowing what Edwin did and what Angelina wore. Specialists push the subdivision of observations about fact to an even more extreme nicety; but they only address other specialists. The rest of the world prefers to take its information and its excitement from two sources of entertainment, the newspaper and the novel. It is almost certain that if *Modern Painters* or *The Grammar of Assent* or even *The History of Civilization* had been published within the last ten years, it would have scarcely attracted any attention at all, outside a narrow circle. It is more than probable that Buckle and Newman, if not Mr. Ruskin, would have resigned themselves to the inevitable, and have tried to present their views and convictions in the form of tales.

This curious condition has been greatly encouraged, if it has not been mainly caused, by a change in English habits of life which will certainly interest and puzzle the historian of the future. If any feature of these last ten years has been more patent than another, it assuredly is the predominant prestige of the exterior parts of social existence. The human body has re-

ceived an amount of attention such as no previous age, perhaps not even the Hellenic, had given it. The elements of education have come to reduce themselves more and more into a sort of disciplined athleticism, in which the mind is not indeed entirely neglected, but is made to take a very inferior position to the limbs. Our public schools have fostered this physical training to such an excess that in many of them participation in sports is more obligatory than attendance at lessons, and to be "good at games" is the only pathway to happiness in this world and the next. Masters are chosen not because of their scholarship or their tact, but because of their prowess at football or cricket, and even the good things of the Church may be secured to-day by the spirited application of a reputation for athletics.

The over-materialism of our educational centres, and the dangerous abuse of physical training, date from a period much earlier than 1888. But during the ten years which have just passed, the boys brought up under the athletic system have been in their prime as men of influence. In the general result, I should be the last to suggest that there has not been much to congratulate ourselves upon. This latest generation of Englishmen is healthy, active, and determined; its members are admirably fitted to employ the hours of their wholesome youth and vigorous middle age in energetic action and in spirited interference with the habits and wishes of inferior populations. They form the body-guard of a nation to which it is exceedingly convenient to belong. But these heroes of a thousand fields, these insatiable players of games which are but forms of mimic warfare, cannot expect, and fortunately do not wish, to excel in the peaceful exercises of the mind as well. What with its polo and its golf, its shooting and its fishing, and all its other enchanting physical exercises, the ruling class in England is much too tired and too happy when evening comes to devote its thought to any serious branch of study or to pursue any difficult train of thought. For the sons of men who used to sit up half the night discussing the *Origin of Species*, Mr. Anthony Hope prepares the sleeping draught of his soothing romances. There is nothing whatever to be sarcastic about in this. It acts like the rule of three. If you spend the day in violent strain of the muscles in the open air, it is absolutely impossible to work your brain at night, and it would be hurtful to you if you were to try to do so.

In this respect the masses of the nation have paid to the rich flattery in its sincerest form. They also have accepted the physical or athletic ideal, and are cultivating it to extravagant excess. It is an admirable thing that young men of the working class should be able to relax their sinews and enjoy as many innocent sports as possible. But, in the fullest seriousness, I suggest that it is not admirable or wholesome, but puerile and almost crazy, that the record of these games should swell into the proportions of national events, that news about county cricket and football should take precedence of the most weighty affairs of state, and that hundreds and thousands of persons should be encouraged by their educated leaders in the press to consider a champion billiard-player a more exalted personage than a great statesman or a great scholar. I do not think that Englishmen of the more moderate way of thinking realize the violent degree to which the athletic ideal has pushed all others to the wall within the last few years. Matthew Arnold warned us that we had a barbarian class amongst us. If he had lived till to-day he might judge that we have practically no other.

While, however, I feel bound to express a certain alarm, or disquietude, at the turn which taste has taken during these last ten years, I am far from supposing it to constitute a lasting danger. It is easy to have too much intellectual strenuousness. We are resting a little, after the stern Middle Victorian priggishness. Literature is, after all, merely the reflection of life, and life may be so vivid as not to require to be illustrated. Doubtless the happy nations only read stories, and the millennium will probably know nothing but illustrated descriptions of its own prosperity. The existence of a Briton, since 1887, has been exceedingly varied and exciting. It has not encouraged contemplation ; it has been full-blooded, robust, contentious. There can be no amazement caused by the fact that those who have enjoyed it, those who have felt its tug at their muscles and their heart-strings, should have turned to books for amusement, and not for intellectual exertion. To follow the masters of thought demands laborious days, and Hegel is hardly the author to take up after a long spin on a bicycle. A sedative is what we have wanted, not a stimulant, rest for the brain, and not the stress of mental gymnastics. Nor would I for a moment pose as a scoffer or a satirist. I have the old, fatalistic conviction that whatever is is right. But I see no

reason for claiming triumphs in the particular field where we have not been fighting, nor in pretending that a decade chiefly spent in other interests and with antagonistic habits has been one of brilliant literary progress. Without a suspicion of sarcasm, I merely record that the ten years since 1887 seem to me to have been marked in England, so far as literature is concerned, by an extraordinary removal of the great traditional figures which gave their tone to thought; by an excessive and unwieldy preponderance of one class of book—and that the class least amenable to criticism—namely, the novel; and by a growth of combined athleticism and commercialism highly unfavorable to art and letters.

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